

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
NATIONAL LIFE BUILDING
MONTPELIER, VERMONT
October 1, 2008**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Sam Lewis (Chairman)

Joann Erenhouse	Rick Moulton
Dave Wulfson	Rep. Bill Aswad
John Cook	C.J. "Mike" Coates
George Barrett	Charles Hunter
Rep. Sonny Audette	Chris Andreasson

OTHERS PRESENT: Robert Ide, VTrans Rail Operations Section
Charlie Miller, VTrans Rail Operations Section
Nancy Rice, VTrans Rail Operations Section
Dick Hosking, VTrans Rail Operations Section
Scott Bascom, VTrans
J. Jeffrey Munger, Senator Sanders Office
Anthony Otis, RRAV
Paul Craven, Craven Mgmt.
Scott Howland, Amtrak
Bob Badger, Clough Harbour
RA Currier, NH Central Railroad
Mary Anne Michaels, VRS
Tom Macaulay, RRA
Chris Jolly, FHWA
Dana Roscoe, PVPC
Matt Levin, VCE
Ted Brady, Senator Leahy's Office
Ron O'Brien, HDR

1. Call to Order & Approval of Minutes

Sam Lewis called the meeting to order at 1 p.m. Introductions were made.

Approval of Minutes (8/8/08)

MOTION by George Barrett, SECOND by Charles Hunter, to approve the 8/8/08 minutes with the following clarification:

Page 2, Item #4 – Amtrak, 1st paragraph, sentence reading: "Regarding interconnectivity of the Vermonter to the Boston market..." – insert "the Amtrak station" before "in White River Jct. south to Boston" to read "...there is no direct bus service from the Amtrak station in White River Jct. south to Boston."

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

2. Knowledge Corridor

Charlie Miller introduced Dan Roscoe with Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and Ron O'Brien, consultant hired by PVPC to do a feasibility study of the 'Knowledge Corridor'. Mr. O'Brien gave up update on progress to date and participating agencies (departments of transportation in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Vermont). Existing Amtrak service, commuter service opportunity and inner-city service opportunity on the line are being investigated. DMU service is a significant consideration to moving Amtrak service onto the Conn River line. Massachusetts wants the DMU project in Vermont to move forward as this helps support their infrastructure improvements. The study is looking at commuter service integration with Connecticut from the south to Springfield as well as independent commuter service in the area, improving Amtrak intercity service, and the high speed rail corridor (Boston-Springfield-New Haven). Mr. O'Brien narrated a video tour of the rail line. Planning questions to consider include moving the Vermonter service onto the PanAm Conn River line, use of DMUs, doubling service in the Knowledge Corridor, having a second roundtrip shuttle to New Haven, integrating Vermont trains with local service, expanding service north of Springfield, ridership and travel markets, and potential economic development with enhanced rail service. Dana Roscoe commented the opportunity and funding to move the Vermonter onto the line is there if Vermont has the DMU cars. There are 49 miles of line to consider. The cost ranges from \$15 million to \$30 million with annual investment every 10 years to bring the track up to Class 3 for 79 mph travel by commuter rail. It was noted the signal system on the northern portion of the line is being restored. Norfolk Southern has been provided with information on the project. Current use on the line which has 263,000 pound capacity includes freight (grain, lumber, coal). It is expected in one construction season the line could be brought up to Class 3 standard to meet Amtrak's requirements, but it is likely the project will cover two years. There is support for the project by Connecticut's congressman and the Massachusetts delegation.

There were questions about the impact on New England Central Railroad in light of the upgrade to the PanAm line which is a direct competitor to NECR (Massachusetts expects some guarantee with their investment of long term passenger service on the line, but the issue does need further discussion), route time (45 minutes will be saved on the Amtrak trip with the connection, the need for a second engine is eliminated and 16 miles of CSX track is no longer used), support facilities such as stations and parking lots being included in the project schedule (for the Vermonter service only the Northampton station will be open in the time frame), economic opportunity for Vermont (the opportunity is mainly on the Massachusetts side; not much change is anticipated on the Vermont side of the line) and whether the configurations and turnaround at the Springfield station will be addressed (it may be possible to reconfigure the crossover, but CSX support is needed).

3. Amtrak

Nancy Rice reviewed revenue and ridership data. There has been continual increase in ridership on both services over the past four years due to marketing efforts to get people out of their cars and riding the train. Amtrak ridership nationally is showing a 14% increase. Ridership increase in Vermonter is 20%. Charlie Miller noted costs for service are going up as is ridership which makes it more palatable for people to understand the

services need to be funded. Matt Levin asked if the ridership and revenues are at a point where the increased revenues are covering the increase in the cost of service. Mr. Miller explained the two trend lines are similar. Both higher fuel cost and higher labor cost (nearly 12% in the contract year) are impacts to be offset by the higher revenues. Sam Lewis pointed out the data were compiled from three months of service under the old contract which had fixed costs and under the new contract (October 1st start date) which has fixed expenses except fuel and revenues which will be actual amounts.

It was noted the Amtrak website shows on-time performance data. Both the Vermonter and Ethan Allen Express services improved on-time performance appreciably in 2008. NECR was recognized for the positive impact on Amtrak's on-time performance as a result of the track work done by NECR.

Mike Coates mentioned the lack of information on buying an Amtrak ticket in Vermont. Charlie Miller noted the brochure is produced by Amtrak and basically contains schedule information. The customer needs to be informed that a reservation is needed before a ticket can be purchased on the train or that tickets can be purchased electronically from a personal computer. This information needs to be advertised. Dave Wulfson suggested money in the budget for Amtrak advertising be used to address the ticket information issue. Sam Lewis assured the money will be used for marketing of the Amtrak service.

MOTION by Joann Erenhouse, SECOND by George Barrett, that the Rail Council make a serious effort to work with other agencies (Amtrak, VTrans, Tourism & Marketing) on marketing of Amtrak service in Vermont and use some of the Amtrak marketing funds to inform the public that tickets are available and can be purchased while on the Amtrak train itself.

DISCUSSION: Charlie Miller mentioned adding a short paragraph in the Amtrak brochure explaining how to purchase a ticket. There were no further comments.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

Staff will provide the Rail Council with more comprehensive Amtrak ridership/revenue information every six months (the information is available on-line as well) and a brief simplified report at each Rail Council meeting.

4. Project Update

Dick Hosking reported the following:

- Manchester-Rutland: ties installed.
- Center Rutland: done.
- Proctor-Florence: ties installed.
- Salisbury-Middlebury: ties to be laid out; continuous welded rail received.
- Washington County Conn River line: 854 ties installed as of 9/29/08.
- CLP Whipple Hollow: on hold.
- NECR: 13 of 16 crossings rebuilt between Hartford and Milton.

Jeff Munger commented the paving on Home Ave. over the railroad crossing was poorly done. Mr. Hosking stated the paving is temporary until the crossing is rebuilt.

Alburgh Trestle

Paul Craven reported a bid of \$850,000 was received to replace 283 spans on the Alburgh trestle (\$1.1 million was budgeted for the project).

Burlington Tunnel

Mr. Craven reported structural problems forced the tunnel to be shut down for three weeks to stabilize the walls of the structure. There are budget implications. The budget for the project is \$1.2 million. Discussions are ongoing with the FRA about revising the Scope of Work to allow use of less shotcrete (only 200' expanse). Thirty-six critical locations will be covered. A concrete floor was installed which will provide additional support of the tunnel walls. Charles Hunter noted the engineer from ECI assured the remainder of the tunnel should be fine for the foreseeable future. Steel ties at the entrance to the tunnel will allow the drop in track needed to gain clearance space.

5. Passenger Rail Subcommittee Report

In the absence of Charlie Moore, Mike Coates reported on the following discussions held by the subcommittee:

- VTrans and the Rail Council are in favor of moving forward on the Castleton train station. Amtrak reviewed the site to determine what is needed. Parking is an issue. Addison County Chamber of Commerce is very excited about the station and passenger rail service on the western corridor as well as increasing rail capacity to 286,000 pounds.
- Sam Lewis reported the DMU financials for next year were increased by \$10 million by the Affordability Committee to a cap of \$69.95 million. Discussions have continued with Colorado Railcar which is under new management. The price guarantee for the DMU cars holds until 10/6/08.
- On-time performance is positively impacted by the improvements to the rail line by NECR. Charles Hunter noted NECR spent \$4.5 million in capital funds on the improvements. There are four bridge resurfacing projects on the NECR track north of Essex Junction.
- Dave Wulfson noted Vermont Railway will be doing much work in the 2009 construction season, including work on two miles of track and a project out of Whitehall, NY.
- FRA grant money of approximately \$1.2 million needs to be spent by next construction season.
- Amtrak on the western corridor (Rutland to Burlington) remains a priority. Service to Montreal was also discussed. Brad Worthen is working on bus service from Montreal to Burlington Airport. Robert Ide noted discussions with Mr. Worthen about extending the bus service to the Main Street Station in Burlington are encouraging.

Robert Ide clarified he emphasized to the Passenger Rail Subcommittee that the highest priority is to maintain the Amtrak service that is in place.

6. Rail Infrastructure Subcommittee

Mike Coates reported the subcommittee discussed the carryover in state rail funds that was essentially lost and agreed the situation needs to be avoided in the future. Contracts that are out should preserve the funds. Sam Lewis explained as budget pressure mounts money from '08 projects has been rescinded and set for '09. The Transportation Fund was downgraded by \$8 million for 2009. VTrans did a plan for the \$8 million downgrade and \$4 million of the plan was accepted by Joint Fiscal. Impact on the Rail Section was \$25,000 including travel, equipment, overtime. No projects were changed. Joint Fiscal will cover the other \$4 million at the next meeting. Central Garage (plow trucks and such), Town Programs, State Highway are expected to be impacted, but not Rail. Transportation funds were down \$1.8 million in August, 2008. September numbers are not released as yet. Dave Wulfson stated rail lost over \$1 million in '08 carryover funding. There was further discussion of carryover funding. It was noted SAFETEA-LU earmarks do not have a time limit. The Secretary of Transportation and Secretary of Administration determine the rescission of funds.

Mike Coates asked about a contract with GRIP. Sam Lewis stated there is no contract. GRIP is involved in the Middlebury rail spur, Rutland rail yard, ABRB-E improvements, and St. Albans. The funds are not necessarily all FRA funds.

Paul Craven asked about the status of the Middlebury EIS. Charlie Miller stated the final EIS is expected in the next three weeks and the Record of Decision by 12/1/08. A preferred alternative is noted in the EIS. Mike Coates asked if the scoping of projects considers what will be found in the EIS. Sam Lewis explained a great deal of information can be used from the EIS, but any problems still need to be identified and alternatives and the benefits of each need to be identified then the preferred alternative is chosen. Mr. Coates contended a cap is needed on EIS cost as it appears the EIS is a drain on money that could be used on the actual project.

Mr. Coates reported the subcommittee also discussed the Five Year Rail Plan and bond money for rail infrastructure. Sam Lewis encouraged the Rail Infrastructure Subcommittee to recast the Five Year Plan. Regarding bonding, there is an extra \$10 million in '09 that has been identified for paving and road projects. The money is for the coming year (part of the \$70 million cap). The Administration has to determine a proposal for the funding.

MOTION by Mike Coates, SECOND by Rick Moulton, that the Rail Council strongly suggest in the upcoming budget that rail be considered for some of the funds.

DISCUSSION: Rick Moulton urged leveraging other monies to maximize the funds. Dave Wulfson urged using the money for rail infrastructure. Existing infrastructure is 100 years old and if new infrastructure is built it will last 100 years as well. There were no further comments.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

Mr. Coates stated the subcommittee discussed 286,000 pound rail capacity and identified Florence-Rutland-Bellows Falls, Rutland-Bennington, and Rutland-Burlington as three priority lines. Dave Wulfson mentioned the Patriot's Corridor impacts east-west traffic through Vermont so the priorities are changing. Through traffic in Vermont is changing. The route from Whitehall-Bellows Falls-Brattleboro was a major corridor, but now that is changing. Mike Coates pointed out OMYA is a significant user (40,000 railcars per year) and they need 286,000 pound capacity. Sam Lewis said rail lines can be prioritized once the inventory and assessment is complete. Work on the inventory is underway.

Jeff Munger asked for an STB update on the Patriot's Corridor. Dave Wulfson stated the decision to be received on October 10th is delayed. There are many interested parties and many issues. An environmental assessment is to be done.

Mike Coates announced reorganization of the subcommittees (passenger rail and rail infrastructure) will be resolved at the December Rail Council meeting.

7. Other Business

Inventory & Assessment Project

Charlie Miller reported on the inventory and assessment project in process. The result will be identification of projects to be programmed and prioritized in the Five Year Plan. A presentation will be given to the Rail Council at the next meeting. The program will be presented to the legislature mirroring what is done with highway projects. Rick Moulton stressed showing when the system will be usable. Robert Ide stressed the state does not have a failed system, but has a better system than a year ago which can be improved. Bob Badger, Clough Harbour, explained the resulting product is an asset management GIS based tool which already exists on the highway side of the transportation department. The tool helps identify assets, existing conditions, and future plans. Work can occur in real time and changes made as needed. The cost of the project is \$92,000. Funds from the western corridor project are being used. Once the information has been compiled and the database built the tool is ready to use. The large railroad companies use similar GIS based tools. VTrans will manage the tool. Dave Wulfson cautioned against entering "bad" data which will result in inaccurate output ("garbage in/garbage out").

Rutland Rail Yard

Tom Macauley reported the alternatives are under review. The next step is design/engineering and right-of-way acquisition. A further update will be provided at the December Rail Council meeting.

Earmarks

Jeff Munger explained there can be earmarks in general or earmarks specifically done by one of the Congressional delegation. With federal earmarks states and towns ask for funding for a project. A portion of the money goes toward enhancement projects, such as bike paths. Earmarks make up less than half of one percent of the federal budget. Ted Brady stated the President of the United States includes many earmarks in the transportation bill. Congress makes the earmarks more regionalized. Charlie Miller stated

the rail system has benefited from infusion of money from earmarks so Vermont should continue to take advantage of earmarks at every opportunity.

S.294 Amtrak Reauthorization

Jeff Munger announced the Amtrak reauthorization was passed by Congress.

Champlain Chamber of Commerce and GBIC Support Rail

The Champlain Chamber of Commerce and GBIC spoke in support of rail in a recent position paper.

Environmentally Friendly Engine

Vermont Railway will operate an environmentally friendly engine for two months between Rutland and Florence.

Grant Applications

Thanks were extended to Charlie Miller for writing grant application for Vermont Railway and NECR.

8. Next Meeting/Agenda Items

Next Meeting: December 3, 2008, National Life Building, Montpelier, 1 p.m. – 4 p.m.

9. Adjournment

MOTION by George Barrett, SECOND by Charles Hunter, to adjourn the meeting.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:10 p.m.

RScty: M.E.Riordan